

Ensaio 34

Tópico 1

“As flies are to wanton boys, are we to the gods”. This famous quotation from King Lear, one William Shakespeare’s most celebrated plays, encapsulates in a particular way the debate surrounding Harvey Siegel’s quotation in Educating Reason. While the context of the play is vastly different from the extract, this phrase represents a key point surrounding the fruitful debate around the philosophical implications of the text: the relevance of things outside of our control. We assume we have total control over our mental faculties, and our capacity for reason, regardless of the influence of our social context or irrational imagination. In fact, it seems to us that one of the key characteristics for reason is the fact that it perfectly conforms to our will. While most people will allow for some exceptions (for example, those who suffer from debilitating mental illness, or those under the influence of drugs with hallucinogenic properties), it is near impossible to draw a line between our innermost thoughts and our capacity for critical reasoning. This means that there are those that could argue that our critical thinking is inextricably linked in the purest of ways to certain principles, which can be of both metaphysical or social relevance. However, there are those who think that our capacity for critical judgement is inherently impaired, and it is not necessarily isomorphic to our better judgement or certain values that can be identified. These thinkers tend to follow three major lines, which can be summarized succinctly as follows:

1. Creativity and imagination, which are often the products of impulses of irrational desire rather than social principles, are an important part of critical thought;
2. The impartiality of critical thinking is a false construct. Thinkers like George Santanyana believe that, since we are first acquainted with “Dogma”, ideas inherited from society and embraced before we have the capacity to make a sound and rational judgement about them, and these often form the basis of our future judgement, our critical thinking is necessarily “suspended in the air”, instead of being linked to universal values like consistency, fairness, and impartiality of judgement. This is linked to the idea expressed by thinkers such as Whitehead and Wittgenstein about the inherent deficiencies in our language and how this removes their impartiality.
3. Following Lakoff, we can claim that people’s critical thinking is based not on principles but rather metaphors and image schemas inherited from society, which depend not on universal values but on what linguistic enclave they belong to.

To all of these claims, there exists responses, from diverse thinkers, from Kant, to communitarian philosophers, to Buddhist thinkers. These will all be entertained in due time, but, for now, it seems appropriate to start with analyzing the first claim mentioned above.

We have the unfortunate tendency to believe that our judgement is completely sound and coherent, perfectly consistent with independent principles from the exterior world. However, first one must define what critical reasoning really is. If we assume that critical reasoning is consistent and fair and impartial, as detailed by Siegel, then we can safely say that, that thought which produces consistent and impartial outcomes are then critical thinking. Fair thinking is that which produces truth: no thought that contains within it something that leads it astray from the truth can describe truth. Partial thinking produces partial results, and inconsistent thinking produces inconsistent results. So far, it seems like this claim against the thesis of the author is just agreeing with almost all of its point, but soon it will be unveiled, through circularity, why critical thinking is not non-arbitrary and perfectly consistent.

That having been said, we must carefully analyze our production of knowledge. First, we should start with the most exact and least partial methods of discovery: the natural sciences. The Baconian method has been a staple of the sciences for centuries now, and we can only thank whatever celestial being their may be that it has not been followed by the letter in the many years since it has been conceived. To briefly summarize it, it essentially follows that one must produce a rational hypothesis based on previous evidence, and from there try to produce a fair test in order to either prove or disprove their previous hypothesis, and thus, entirely from observation, find through induction whether the hypothesis was correct or incorrect. To start off, the hypothesis already requires abandoning previous principles. If people only followed the opinions that are already supported by science when coming up with ideas, then science would not have produced any knowledge at all. Instead, there must be a leap, independent from the inductive method of science, completely unsupported, in order to find something new. Assumptions must be made which are not consistent with previous findings, not perfectly neutral, but often based in the whims of the researcher. Some of the most important scientific findings occurred on the “gut feelings” of the scientists. Furthermore, creativity, and non-critical reasoning, is also necessary in the production of the actual experiment. Anyone who has ever tried planning a scientific experiment from scratch knows that the experiments you use, the techniques you employ, the quantity of this-or-that you use cannot all be perfectly deduced from previous principles, critically. At some point, a leap of faith must be made – just as Kierkegaard argued that true faith is abandoning the pointless pursuit of trying to reach God through pure reasoning, as the scholastic tradition of Aquinas attempted for so long, true science also requires abandoning the strict scientific method, since in attempting to produce true knowledge we need creativity and imagination. Be it in the social or natural sciences, the subjective classification systems we use to categorize things, the variables we choose to ignore, even the words we use to write down our findings make it inherently partial.

Now, someone may argue that what has been described is not true critical thinking. Yet, going back to the discussion two paragraphs ago, does this not produce results? Without this bastardized scientific method, that allows scientists to make leaps of faith in what they investigate and how, we could not have built our strong bridges of steel, our ornaments of gold. How could someone look around our society, admire all the advancements, good or bad, we have made since the time of the hunter-gatherers, and think that this progress has not involved the accumulation of true knowledge? Every monument we build to ourselves is a monument also to the ineffable creativity that was required to build it. Every action we engage in is novel in a unique way – it is a new state of being in a world of eternal flux, a droplet of Heraclitean water, eternally changing.

However, there is a counter-claim to the argument expounded above. This is necessity. Simply put, critical thinking is connected to principles in that it is based on first principles of thought that are completely necessary. Even though creativity exists, it is distinct in that all of its products are contingent, even inside our own logic. This view was famously explored by Immanuel Kant, and it applies both to metaphysics and ethics, since, as Deleuze once said, the function that Time serves in Kantian metaphysics, Laws do in his ethics. Now, we can engage in the rich tradition of interpreting Kant's thoughts in our own manner and taking things in diverse directions. To start with, time:

Time underlies everything. It is the ultimate consistent property; it is inalienable, it is unignorable, it is unassailable. All knowledge presupposes time. When we say, "The book is on the table.", while the statement seems to denote a static relation, the book being on the table, the realization and recognition of this property necessarily necessitates the passage of time. If the book's presence on top of the table does not endure through time at all, then I think the reader will agree it cannot be said that the book was ever on top of the table at all. Thus, time is the ultimate principle, since, in its inherent consistency (it inevitable, and necessarily, moves in a speed of one-second-per-second), it provides a necessary backdrop to all that can be rationally described. Therefore, our rationality is not arbitrary, and it cannot be inconsistent, at least in a formal way since it follows, necessarily, the necessary flow of time. This may seem trivial, but it is important that it is inconceivable that a metaphysical idea breaks this notion. Time, whether you believe it is a priori or all-encompassing, is axiomatic.

Simply put, since existence is the ultimate basis of all the facts in existence, anything that is necessary for existence is in turn necessary in itself. If we find that our rational thinking is based upon this, then critical thinking itself is impartial and strict. Previously, we applied that to time, but it also applies to its more sociable counterparts, Laws. There are actions that, if they were universally taken, then it would lead to non-existence. An example is murder: if everyone practiced it, then it would lead to the demise of the human race. Therefore, necessarily, we must not conduct this action, since if it was universally committed, that would violate our principles. This is a perfectly fair and consistent principle, since it must be universally

applied, and it is therefore makes possible a non-arbitrary critical thinking linked to social values. Therefore, Siegel was correct.

Now, the second claim must be evaluated. Briefly put, it states that ideas that we inherit from society before we can epistemologically deconstruct them are interpreted as fact, and therefore our thoughts, even those we consider rational, are not based on fundamental principles but rather these “dogmas”.

When a human being is born, they are not yet capable of discerning true reality from illusion. Like Descartes, who could not distinguish between the men walking outside his home and mechanical robots dressed as men, children cannot tell a sleight of hand from the truth, na opinion from a fact, or a fallacious argument from a coherent one. These experiences form the ideas from the child, how they think about the world, which they inherit mostly from their surroundings, and shape their investigations into the nature of reality in the future. When we begin investigating the very basis of our thoughts, we have already established inside ourselves, subconsciously, that the outside world is real, and even those who are totally convinced that solipsism is true cannot pretend otherwise. Philosophy is necessarily conducted *in media res*, as Santanyana put it. Therefore, while we can reason about first principles, and form eloquent ideas about its nature and character, these first principles will always be at the end of our philosophical investigations: we have already established what comes after due to our unconscious dogma. To claim that critical thinking is impartial, and those who think critically act according to certain set values, is putting the cart before the horse: impartiality of judgement is deduced from “critical” thinking, not the other way around. Due to this collapse of epistemological foundationalism, we cannot assume what our reasoning is actually truly based on, since our thoughts are forever muddled by our irrational past, our conventional convictions. Therefore, critical thinking, reason, or any such concepts can only be defined by how they exist in the social sphere rather than any inherent necessary characteristics, since these are just the illusions of mankind.

Another problem is language. No matter how much we write, how detailed we are with our descriptions, text can never truly create a perfectly detailed image in the mind, it cannot perfectly convey information. There is always bias, and imperfections, in thought. The Greek philosophers often based their understanding of philosophical concepts under the conventional interpretations of those words in Greek rather than any objective understanding that transcends language. Our rational thought cannot ever transcend the limitations of language, and thus we can never hope to reach the murky depths of first principles, since knowing these as necessary and objective and true would require a perfect language that is impossible. Language, instead, as Wittgenstein put it, is simply social games that allow us to convey imperfect piece of information to each other and, as Whitehead believes, our philosophy cannot concern itself with error since error is inevitable. Our rational thoughts cannot possibly be non-arbitrary, since even the term “non-arbitrary” is arbitrary in itself, and incomplete in its

nature. Therefore, consistency and impartiality are unreachable goals for reason. Siegel was wrong.

Now seems like the appropriate time to entertain opposing arguments. One must concede that the argument above is compelling, yet it misses a key fact: the fact that critical thinking is based on our social surroundings is exactly what makes them principled! Our reasoning is necessarily based on our desires, which are in turn based on key social concepts, which include fairness, impartiality of judgement, etc. While one may think of possible exceptions, such as, for example, our sexual desires, which are innate and irrational, these are still based on social concepts to a certain extent. For example, our affections are often directed towards a certain (or both) gender(s), a societal rather than biological concept, and towards a specific person, which also requires a concept. It is practically inconceivable to think of a desire that is not directed to something which has an identity which is socially constructed. While this point may seem trivial, it will become clearer once the flaw of the claim above is revealed. That flaw is that impartiality, consistency, fairness, etc. do not need to be objective, or true, or necessary, or consistent in and of themselves in order to have an innate connection to critical thinking. Why prioritize critical thinking in the ontological deflation conducted above? Why not do the opposite, and flip things around? These social conventions are real as social conventions, and they need not be any more real than that. We can still state that there is a connection between the concepts, that is true following the argument above about the inherent sociability of desire, and how desire conducts our reason, without any recourse to any form of foundationalism. However, we are diving into unsubstantiated opinions here: how can someone truly prove that, in this ramshackled world, consistency requires truth?

Now, we can arrive at the last claim against Siegel stated in the introduction. This claim is partly based on the research conducted by Lakoff, a cognitive linguist who has posited that human reasoning is based not on axioms, or principles, but rather on metaphors that govern our thoughts, and can be extracted from our language. An example is the Argument is War metaphor, which can be seen in common expressions in the English language such as:

I completely annihilated him in that debate!

Her argument got shot down very quickly.

Francine and Kevin traded blows back and forth, until Kevin won.

If we imagine an alternative society where this metaphor didn't exist, it's very possible that, in this society where arguments aren't won or lost, but instead are equated to dancing instead, then the political situation in that society could very plausibly be hypothesized to be a lot more harmonious and less polarized than one would find in the United States, and many other Anglophone regions.

Such metaphors are not based on principles, but actually the opposite. The principles that we hold dear, and all our ideas and classification systems that we force

upon an unclassifiable world, are based on this linguistic phenomena. Underneath these metaphors lie image schemas, which are essentially concrete mental images that form an intuitive basis for our thoughts. Want an example? How about the sentence I just wrote? Let's analyze:

Underneath these metaphors lie image schemas (...)

The word "underneath", in this sentence, gives the reader an idea of logical foundation, as in image schemas are logically prior to metaphors, yet the notion of "underneath" perfectly conveys this abstract concept with completely unrelated material one. So does "logically prior"!

Therefore, we can reason that our critical thinking is not linked at all to consistency, fairness, or for that matter any values at all that one can possibly name. Instead, it is based on metaphors, that subconsciously force us to categorize the world we inhabit in unnatural and arbitrary ways which shape our thoughts and actions. All of it comes down to the concrete image schemas which form our thoughts, be it regarding the mass appeal of nativist policies of severe border patrol and xenophobia based on the image schema of enclosure, or the example stated above. Siegel was wrong: principles are simply the byproduct of the metaphors, whether they are intended or not.

We arrive now at the last counter-claim. This counter-claim states that there is no proof for the order stated above. It is simply treated as fact that metaphors are the basis for our principles, but is that really the case? Couldn't an equally logical argument be made that states that it is, in fact, the opposite? That the examples of metaphors given above are based on our societal values which compel us to act, one of the ways in which we do so being these aforementioned metaphors? Let's re-analyze the case study of Argument is War, with the phrases mentioned above:

I completely annihilated him in that debate!

Her argument got shot down very quickly.

Francine and Kevin traded blows back and forth, until Kevin won.

Couldn't one just as easily say that this is the result of a broken electoral process, rather than the cause? Does that not seem more likely? One would be hard-pressed to say that the colloquialisms employed by the general populace cause subconscious seismic shifts in the political environment, and if one did, the burden of proof would lie in the person. What seems more likely, in fact, is that the dysfunctional way in which Anglophone societies communicated their ideas led to these expressions making their way into the cultural lexicon. In Brazil, people very often include expressions from the world of soccer in their day-to-day lives, yet no-one could reasonably say that these expressions caused the sport's popularity, and not, as is very clear, that the opposite effect in fact occurred. Therefore, the argument that metaphor is the basis of critical thinking is false, since in fact the opposite has been shown to be the case.

In the many paragraphs above, different perspectives, philosophical currents and ways of thinking have been evaluated and put through rigorous examination in order to determine the validity of the objections to the main thesis of the extract from Harvey Siegel – that our critical thinking, our rationality, as are our actions (when we act rationally), is inextricably linked, and in accordance with, certain identifiable principles. The first argument entertained accepted the notion of critical thinking, but departed with Mr. Siegel's thesis due to a belief that creativity was an essential part of rational thought. While the corresponding counter-argument was convincing, the notion that creativity is inextricable to rational thought, following a pragmatic definition of critical thinking that was not contested, still remains strong, and thus it seems to follow logically that Siegel has been convincingly refuted in at least one count. Moving on to the second claim against the extract, it, unlike the first one, challenges the notion that critical thinking is a coherent concept at all, by arguing that impartiality, fair judgement, and consistency are based in perfect reasoning, and thus is completely impossible following the argument from dogma, as well as the inherent fallibility of language. The counter-argument states that impartiality, fair judgement, and all the other principles stated by Siegel do not necessitate perfect reasoning at all, but in fact, them having solely social rather than ontological existence does not refute Siegel's thesis. That being said, it seems to be the case that it makes for a weaker version of the claim, although it seems to be technically correct. Following from the assumption that principles may only be social phenomena rather than metaphysical ones, the third and last argument against Siegel borrows Lakoff's conception of metaphors in order to argue that our critical thinking is not in accordance with certain values, but rather with metaphors and their fundamental origin, image schemas. While the descriptions are certainly convincing, the argument is convincingly undermined by the following counter-argument, which raises the valid point regarding the logical order which is pre-supposed in the 3rd argument.

All of that being considered, it seems to be the case that only the first argument against Siegel manages to remain mostly intact without much in the way of logical reservations. That being said, it is certainly arguable that ontological deflation does, in and of itself, cause Siegel's thesis to collapse, as argued by the second claim, and coming to a clear-cut conclusion on the third one that would satisfy all parties would require an extended evaluation of all the experimental evidence. Therefore, we must conclude that Siegel's argument has been severely undermined by its opponents, although it remains technically defensible if certain standpoints are adopted by its proponents.